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# East Timor becoming central to Indonesian politics

***The killing of 6 villagers in Liquisa was headline news in the Indonesian press for many weeks. Several political weeklies focused attention on East Timor. There has been a major shift in the reporting and public opinion. Indonesian society is becoming more aware of the fundamental issues involved.***

The turning point was the Santa Cruz massacre in November 1991. Before the bloodbath, reporting on East Timor in the Indonesian press was minimal, mostly reflecting the government's version. Reading between the lines which has become a habit for readers of the heavily controlled Indonesian press, was the only way to get some inkling of the realities in East Timor. Since the Santa Cruz massacre, several factors have contributed to the change in perceptions.

For many Indonesians the Santa Cruz tragedy was an eye-opener; it helped them realise that there was something fundamentally wrong in East Timor. In addition, there was the international outcry; instead of being an isolated issue in a faraway place, East Timor was now firmly on the international agenda. The Indonesian press and some well-informed Indonesians were well aware that the government was having to cope with massive international pressure. The sacking of three senior officers and the jail sentences, albeit derisory, passed against several junior officers who were held responsible for the wrongdoings at Santa Cruz, was unprecedented. Since then, news from East Timor has become a regular feature in the press. Although most reporting was heavily biased, some journals took an independent line, particularly the weekly magazines *Tempo, Editor* and *DeTIK* which were banned in June 1994. Reporting in the daily press has also improved enormously.

A few years ago only glowing reports about developments in East Timor appeared. Nowadays there is mention of the huge unemployment problems and ethnic tensions between the Timorese and Indonesian migrants. The re-emergence of *ninjas*, masked and hooded gangs, has been well reported in the press.

The increased volume of news in the international media and regular reports by the BBC World Service, Radio Nederland and Radio Australia have also contributed to a greater understanding of the issues among news-hungry Indonesians. The truth about East Timor is not hidden anymore for the Indonesian public, the facts can be obtained in many ways.

## The issue gathers momentum

Incidents occurred one after the other; from 12 November 1991 to the Liquisa killings of 12 January 1995, there were 23 actions in East Timor. In 1994, at least fourteen demonstrations by Timorese were reported in the Indonesian press. The arrest and trial of Xanana Gusmao was a major event; his ability, locked away in Cipinang prison in Jakarta, to keep in the news has made him a household name. Frequent condemnations of Indonesia by the international community created enough material for press reports as well as spin-offs like the creation of *Komnas HAM*, the National Commission of Human Rights, initiated by President Suharto himself. This commission was seen by the most human rights activists in Indonesia as the face-saving device of the government against the many attacks from foreign governments on human rights violations. The Santa Cruz massacre undoubtedly paved the way for the establishment of *Komnas HAM*, an assertion that would be vehemently denied by the Indonesian authorities.

The persistent actions by Timorese youth, directly or indirectly organised by the Timorese clandestine movement, has also contributed to growing awareness of the Indonesian public. In particular the huge demonstration on 14 July 1994 at *Universitas Timtim* in Dili and the daring act of twenty-nine Timorese on 12 November who occupied the US embassy grounds in Jakarta were reported under banner headlines in the national press. The many actions of the Timorese helped to shatter the myth that anti-Indonesia sentiments were merely an expression of a 'tiny majority of Timorese fanned by some anti-Indonesia groups abroad'. The Timorese resistance has matured over the years and their well-planned actions in East Timor as well as in several cities in Java and Bali is making it far more difficult for the Indonesian security forces.

Greater global awareness of the East Timor drama and the continuous tensions in the region itself has had an impact on political life in Jakarta. At different levels the East Timor issue has moved cen-

tre stage. The APEC summit in November 1994 was a clear example of how Timorese students filled the television screens around the world with their actions. The summit, surrounded as it was by excessive security measures, paled into insignificance. The deeds of the Timorese had a tremendous impact on the Indonesian authorities. The flamboyant Major-General Hendropryono, the Jakarta military commander, was held responsible and was sacked by Suharto.

Growing tensions between *Bina Graha* (President Suharto's office) and *Cilangkap* (Armed Forces headquarters ) is being played out these days with East Timor as the battleground. The Liquisa killings is another example of how Suharto is using his powers to remove military opponents because of developments in East Timor. Latest reports report that five officers will be dismissed, including Colonel Kiki Syahnakri, the military commander of East Timor and Lt. Colonel Tri Syarwan, the Liquisa District Military Commander.

## National Commission

The inquiry by *Komnas HAM* (National Commission of Human Rights) into the Liquisa killings created its own momentum and once again became front page news. From the beginning it was clear that members of the Commission were not impressed by the army's version of events.

The two visits to East Timor prompted interesting statements by members of the team. Prof. Muladi, a jurist and Dean of the Diponegoro State University in Semarang, Central Java said: "*Although it* (East Timor) *has been part of Indonesia for nearly 20 years, conditions are unchanged. Surely there must be something wrong. Now we need to know what is actually wrong*" (*Kompas*, 27 Febr. 1995). Prof. Muladi questioned the development programme. Referring to the the many roads that have been built, he said: *"Is this really what the people want?"*, adding that maybe they need cooperatives or other forms of development.

Another Commission member, Marzuki Darusman went further, declaring that a policy review is needed. During his visits, he gained the impression that an increasing number of people are disillusioned with the results of *integrasi*. It does appear that members of the Commission met a much wider range of East timorese than is normally the case of visiting Indonesian officials. Nurcholis Madjid, another member of the Commission, that the commission decided to speed up their Liquisa inquiry because of the flood of letters from abroad about the incident. [*Bernas*, 28.II.1995] As for Darusman, he frankly ackonwledged that information available to Commission members from abroad is often not available from the government. [*Republika*, 20.II.1995]

The Liquisa investigation will be a testcase for the credibility and independence of *Komnas HAM*. The commission has grown in prominence; more citizens are filing their complaints with the Commission. Human rights organisations abroad and at home will constantly scrutinise its work; it will either function as an extension of the government and or it will act as a kind of Ombudsman.

## East Timor as part of the strategy

While government ministries like Foreign Affairs and the Interior as well as the security apparatus are these days being forced to fill their days with Timor affairs, this holds true for other strata in society. The view that East Timor is a colony of Indonesia is not longer uncommon.. But a variety of views are circulating among Indonesian NGOs on how to deal with the East Timor issue. Some mainstream NGOs don't want to touch the issue, still regarding it as the kiss of death. Such a view dates back several years back when the East Timor issue was still seen as a taboo. These NGOs fear that the security apparatus will immediately clamp down on their activities if they make an issue of East Timor.

Along similar lines but in a kind of quasi theoretical framework some NGOs argue that as agents of change, the key lies in bringing about fundamental change in Jakarta. Once changes have occurred in Jakarta, the pre-conditions will exist for change in Dili. The followers of this theory, former *Orde Baru* proponents but now strongly anti-Suharto, also argue that raising the issue of East Timor will ultimately strenghthen the regime: Suharto will close ranks with the military and all the different military fractions will join forces to face the East Timor proponents.

But a growing number of young human rights and political activists have adopted a principled stance on East Timor, taking the same position as the Timorese resistance. The Timorese Peace Plan has been published in Bahasa Indonesia along with important statements by Xanana Gusmao. There

is growing admiration for young Timorese who have time and again captured centre stage. The theory that change in Jakarta must come first first is rejected for a variety of reasons. Human rights violations in East Timor are blatant and for this reason alone, East Timor should be highlighted. Moreover the spotlight on East Timor has gravely tarnished Indonesia's international image, making it easier to raise human rights issues in Indonesia itself like the freedom of association and freedom of the press. Timorese petitioners at the UN Human Rights Commission have themsleves raised those issues alongside the East Timor issue. This will only strenghten the campaign on human rights violations in general in Indonesia and put the Indonesian government further onto the defensive.

## The Liquisa killings

The Liquisa killings have again thrust East Timor into the centre of Indonesian politics. From many different angles the Liquisa case reflects the growing awareness of the public on Timor affairs. The version produced by platoon leader Lt. Jeremias Kase and backed by his superiors has been contradicted by the press and by statements of individual members of *Komnas HAM*. Top-ranking military officers and Suharto's spokesperson Moerdiono were forced to admit that there had been a "violation of procedures". That the six killed were innocent villagers, confirmed by different sources, has become the accepted version of the more informed sections in the Indonesian society.

The uproar that greeted the Liquisa tragedy reflects the political changes that have taken place in society. The heavily corporatist political structure is gradually disintegrating. Society, in particular the middle class, now demands more openness and believes that voicing different or even contradictory views is no longer taboo. East Timor, now at the centre of the international and domestic agenda, is helping to accelerate this process of pluriformity. There are good grounds to believe that the East Timor issue could hasten the process of change in Jakarta and become an important factor for the process of democracy and improvement of human rights.

Liem Soei Liong
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